

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

A Hijab by Any Other Name

Michael Armstrong

When Australians arrive in the Gulf for the first time, they notice the intense heat and the alien sounds. The dust, if it's the season, makes them wish they were somewhere else, but what hits them most is what they see: the *abayas* – black robes, a *burqa* by another name; and *dishdashers* – the (usually) white robes worn by men and topped-off with a white or checkered *ghutra*. But most Australians visit only Dubai or Doha airports, or the tourist areas of the Emirates, where the concentration of *abayas* and *dishdashers* is diluted by foreigners and Arabs in Western clothing. If you live in the Gulf and get off the tourist track, the effect on your eyes is more acute, although it does not last.

Living in the Gulf, you will jostle with ten or more women wearing *abayas* in the fruit and vegetable department at the supermarket. At a department store, you will stand in a line with so much black and white you will think you are at the MCG with the Collingwood cheer squad, except for the language. You might walk down a dusty side street into a men's hairdresser – called 'saloons' without a hint of teetotal irony – and be confronted with a half-dozen men in *dishdashers* waiting for a haircut. You might stand in an elevator and see the doors open to three or four veiled women. You can't see their faces, can't see *them* at all. But they will get in, maybe say '*Assalaam alaykum*', and when the elevator gets to your floor you will get out and go about your business.

I was once at the transport department with a used car dealer – who wore the *dishdasher* and spoke limited English – and as we waited to transfer my newly purchased vehicle into my name, I saw a group of men in *dishdashers* staring at my feet, wry smiles on their faces. My lime green socks, worn under a blue suit, had become visible after I sat down. You feel the culture shock when a group of men wearing *dishdashers* silently mock your socks.

There is a lot of anxiety in Australia about the clothing worn by Muslim men and women, and I have had many conversations with Arab friends about the *abaya* and the *dishdasher*. While modesty is a consideration when wearing the *abaya*, the *hijab* (headscarf) or the *niqab* (the veil), the choice of attire is as much about culture as it is about religion. Some say women wear *abayas* because they want to wear them. Others say, 'A girl's father will decide whether she wears the *abaya* or the veil'. Still others say that, after marriage, husbands ask their wives to be 'covered'. Whatever the reason, it is untrue to say that all women who wear the *abaya* are meek or submissive.

I once asked a female student why she was wearing an *abaya* as I'd never seen her wearing one before. She said, 'I had to take my sister to school this morning and I couldn't be bothered getting dressed, so I just put on an *abaya*.' During a discussion in class, I asked a *dishdasher*-clad student if he would wear it should he ever take a holiday in Australia – all the male students want to go to the Gold Coast. He said he would not because he knew he would be treated differently if he did. Someone in the class called out, 'Terrorist!', and they all laughed. Sometimes you realise that Gulf Arabs know much more about us than we know about them.

I have done surreptitious ad-hoc surveys in class to gauge *abaya* conformity. A little less than one quarter of my students wear only Western clothes. Another quarter wears the *abaya* (including *hijab*) and the other half wears a *hijab* with Western clothes. A very small percentage – none in my current classes – wears the veil. So, I don't see many *abayas* in class, but I don't

'A *Hijab by Any Other Name*.' Michael Armstrong.
Transnational Literature Vol. 8 no. 1, November 2015.
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

see much hair either. Other than their religion and the social limitations imposed by it, none of my students have attitudes very different from students in the West. They care about getting a good job, travelling, marrying and having a family, and posting on social media.

Part of the reason for my living and working in the Gulf is to experience a culture that is so foreign to me. It is not easy at times because there is so much to understand and remember. Once, when I sat down in class and put my feet on a desk to feign boredom because a group of students who were supposed to make a presentation couldn't get their PowerPoint to work, the (all male) class gasped. I had known that showing the soles of your feet is disrespectful, but I'd forgotten. And anyone who has worked with me knows that I love to put my feet on my desk. But I know that most Arabs expect me to make mistakes, expect me to be ignorant, expect me to misunderstand and want to help me understand. Most of them are thrilled that I am interested enough to want to be put straight.

Although the *dishdasher* seems the male equivalent of the *abaya*, it has no religious connotation at all. If you see a Gulf Arab wearing a *dishdasher*, he is not necessarily a fundamentalist, probably not pious, nor is he likely to be a sheikh. At formal occasions, most male Arabs wear a *dishdasher*. Gulf citizens mostly wear *dishdashers* with a *ghutra* and *egal* – the black rope that sits atop the head to keep the *ghutra* in place. *Dishdashers* are often made from expensive designer cloth, tailored, and optioned with concealed pockets or buttons, fancy collars or French cuffs. There are many regional variations. In the Gulf, wearing a *dishdasher* is no more usual or unusual than a Westerner wearing a business suit.

In the western media, there is too much focus on the cultural differences, particularly clothing, between Westerners and Muslims. The attention is counterproductive, often misrepresented by ignorant politicians or the media, the attacks serving no purpose other than to alienate individuals or divide communities. It is true that in some countries the *abaya* has a powerful religious connotation. In Turkey, a secular state consisting mostly of Muslims, university lecturers are not allowed to wear a *hijab* in class. 'Religious' clothing – but not the *hijab* – is banned in public. Many progressive Turkish Muslims argue that the *hijab* should not be worn by any employee of a government organisation in order to protect the secular orientation of the state; they say a government employee wearing a *hijab* undermines Attaturk's secular vision. These are left-wing, bleeding-heart Muslims. Many Australians hold a similar philosophy about religious clothing in their country, but it is a slippery slope argument that does not, at least in Australia, stand up to scrutiny. Ask an Arab from the Gulf and most would say they wear an *abaya* or a *dishdasher* for cultural not religious reasons. Does it make some Muslims feel closer to Allah? Perhaps, as a cross might for a Catholic. And I've never met anyone in the Gulf who has told me that women should be covered. Are there people here who think that way? I'm sure there are, just as there are Australians who don't think their daughters should wear tank-tops and boob-tubes.

The 'ban the *burqa*' brigade in the West does not see how similar their attitudes are to fundamentalist Muslims who want to force their beliefs upon others. It is a striking irony that many Muslims who flee persecution and war to come to the West are met with the same attitudes that made them flee in the first place. If only Kafka were still alive.

At first, it is confronting, to use former Prime Minister Tony Abbott's phraseology, to walk into a room and see *abayas* or *dishdashers*. You get a shock when you have a conversation with a woman at some government department and can't see her face. But after a while, *abayas* and *dishdashers* become so normal that you stop thinking about them. You don't feel embarrassed to ask a veiled woman to repeat what she said because her veil has muffled her words. I know some of my veiled students so well that I can recognise them by their voices. I'll enter an elevator and

say: 'Hello, Sara/Zainab/Maryam,' after being greeted. I've known some of them for years and never seen their faces.

And here comes the importance – as they are fond of saying in the Gulf – of allowing men and women to wear what they want: the more we see it, the less confronting it becomes. It becomes normal, in the same way that the unadorned head or above-the-knee skirt in the West became normal. Is there a boundary? Who decides where to place the boundary? Is it moving? Which way is it going? Maybe the boundary in the West goes in both directions: you can't cover-up and you can't reveal too much, as though someone is saying: 'Let's put it in the middle somewhere so we'll all be comfortable and relaxed'.

Clothes *do* say something about us. We tell a story about ourselves every time we choose our clothes for the day. A leisure suit and Ugg boots: there's a story. A blue suit, white shirt, red tie: another story. A little black dress. A muscle shirt. Patches on the elbows of your jacket.

Some days you simply want to say, 'I couldn't be bothered today and just put on an *abaya*.'

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